

## **Immigration with Integrity: The Korean Church of Urbana-Champaign**

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The Korean Church of Urbana-Champaign was founded in 1973 by a small but devout group of students. Today, it has become a well-established institution with more than 600 members, comprised mainly of foreign students from Korea, Korean professors at the University of Illinois, and Korean research workers; each group brings family members who are part of the church as well. The congregation has proven to be focused, active, and dedicated. From its humble origins, the church has grown as an influence in the city: it has proven itself a good citizen in its immediate neighborhood, and its members have created businesses and jobs in the city.

By 2005, the Korean Church, located at 608 West Green Street, had a “sister church”: it partnered in sharing facilities with the First Presbyterian Church of Urbana. At the time, the two jointly proposed an expansion of 10,000 square feet for an addition on the west side of the building, a request that reveals the growth of the Korean church. The request was at variance with zoning regulations and needed to be presented to the Urbana council. Marya Ryan, who lives just north of the church and is a former Urbana council member, noted that an addition covering 5,900 square feet could have been built without having to seek a variance. The church was really looking for a good-sized expansion for the construction of its Korean Mission Center, which would be used primarily by the Koreans.

A hearing on the variance request drew an overflow crowd of supporters and opponents to the city council’s February 21, 2005 meeting. Among the latter were a

number of neighborhood residents who thought the church was already a burden on a largely residential neighborhood and should not be allowed to expand. For example, Linda Lorenz said it “destroys the residential character of the neighborhood and lowers the property values.” The Urbana council ended up approving the addition, with council members voting 5-2 to grant the construction of a mission center, which would contain offices, classrooms, and a fellowship hall, for the Korean Church. The council’s decision, of course, delighted Rev. Jong Ham of the Korean Church, who looks to recruit more people from the Korean community. That there were enough proponents of the project for the council to approve the expansion showed that the majority of people saw the church as a virtuous institution and a good citizen.

The Korean Church and Urbana’s First Presbyterian Church, founded about 150 years ago, have a close connection that extends back more than three decades. Urbana Presbyterians had started their international interests in a big way in 1973 when they offered church meeting space to the Korean Church. They had also provided an old house near the church for offices that served the Korean Presbyterians. Since then, the two Presbyterian churches, both part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a mainline Protestant Christian denomination in the United States, have been inseparable. In 1975, the Urbana church congregation hired a Korean, the Rev. Hewon Han, as an associate minister. Youth in the church colloquially called him “Hap,” a manifestation of the familiarity and informality of the two churches. Further emphasizing the close relationship, the Korean Church had agreed to pay most of the bill for the \$1 million Korean Mission Center project, although it would be owned by the First Presbyterian Church. “They are paying for it and managing it, but we will own it,” Rev. Don Mason

of the First Presbyterian Church said; “One key unlocks all the doors in this building. We have celebrated a 30-year relationship and have a covenant to share the same facilities.” Speaking about its paragon partnership with the First Presbyterian Church, Rev. Jong Ham said, “The two churches are a good model of two different cultures working together.” Upon hearing the Urbana council’s decision, Rev. Mason ebulliently stated, “We’re excited about new possibilities for doing missions together, doing our activities together, in a multi-cultural way.”

The Korean Church’s influence on traffic in the area was initially a major cause of concern, as the February 2005 council meeting revealed. Many people, the majority of whom lived near the church, were opposed to the expansion of the church because there already were traffic problems, which would have been exacerbated by the increase in area: “We have parking problems,” said Marya Ryan, and “having this big of a variance is likely to increase the traffic problems.” Another neighbor complained about how a church member’s parked car had blocked his driveway. In fact, many complaints of this sort were received. In an attempt to solve these traffic problems and assuage their neighbors’ grievances, the church talked with the Champaign-Urbana Mass Transit District about installing a bus shelter at the corner of Orchard and Green streets to facilitate access to the church, as well as to encourage use of public buses and not cars. Orange traffic cones were put out in no-parking zones nearby. Rev. Mason said, “We really want to be a good neighbor... We consider it our Biblical mandate to love God and love your neighbor.”

The majority of the members of the church have jobs in the city, thus promoting Korean influence in business. One example is the tae kwon do school on South First

Street, with Han Min Kyo as the current grandmaster. Han, also president of the World Tae Kwon Do Alliance, came to the United States from a family distinguished as a leader in the development of Tae Kwon Do into a modern martial art. There are also several Korean restaurants in Champaign, for example, B-Won on Neil Street and Dorcas on Green Street, that attract Americans well as Koreans. Other church members have opened a hair shop; there are many who work as realtors; and a former member is a doctor at Carle Hospital. These are examples of the integration of Koreans into American society. The church has, in general, become more culturally connected since its foundation.

The Korean Church of Urbana-Champaign has certainly established itself in the city and currently numbers 600 members. Sungsoo Na, a student who immigrated to Champaign to further his education at the University of Illinois, notes that many Koreans marry Americans here, and eventually switch to attending an American church. Interracial marriages are indications that Koreans have become well-integrated with American society. [From “Han’s Tae Kwon Do.” <<http://www.hanstkd.com/>> (Aug. 27, 2007); “Korean Church of Champaign-Urbana.” <<http://www.kc-cu.org>> (Aug. 27, 2007); Mike Monson, “Urbana Church Seeks Variance.” *News-Gazette, Access World News*. NewsBank. <<http://infoweb.newsbank.com/>> (Sept. 8, 2007); Mike Monson, “Urbana Council Approves Church Addition.” *News-Gazette, Access World News*. NewsBank. <<http://infoweb.newsbank.com/>> (Sept. 8, 2007); Student historian’s interview with Sungsoo Na, Sept. 4, 2007; and Lynda Zimmer, “From Diversity to Diversity – Urbana Congregation Started 150 Years Ago.” *News-Gazette, Access World News*. NewsBank. <<http://infoweb.newsbank.com/>> (Sept. 8, 2007).]